

HARD LINES

Are you making the right hardware choices for your school's needs? Caroline Wright has some suggestions...

At BESA it is our aim, and the aim of our members who adhere to a stringent code of practice, to ensure we offer added value support and best practice to help drive up standards in hardware provision in secondary schools and recent changes in adoption...

Today's essential hardware
Our annual 'Information and Communication Technology in UK State Schools' research showed that 88 per cent of secondary schools

have either some or an extensive requirement for laptop computers, which is the highest level of demand recorded since tracking of this product category commenced. The 551 secondary schools who responded to the survey indicated that ICT is currently used in 41 per cent of teaching time. They forecast that by 2014 this will increase to 50 per cent. However, it was their justification for this increase that gives us the most insight into hardware changes in schools. Their view was that it was the growing trend towards the use of mobile devices that would drive up the use of hardware during the school day. Looking then to this anticipated increase in

DID YOU KNOW...
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designed to be consumer devices and are therefore not as easy to lock-down as other hardware and can offer challenges with networking. It is important to ensure the tablet they select has been designed to be used in a school environment with inclusive management software."

Personal provision

Our research also raises questions about the models of provision that we may see in the future. Though beyond the scope of the research, does the trend of the reducing cost of tablets raise the potential for tablets to become a pupil-provided item (Bring Your Own Device, BYOD), with the school responsibility being the integration of the content and apps?

Poyton gives both sides of the argument: "Familiarity with the technology ensures a faster path to student adoption, while helping schools make cost savings," he explains. "The challenge for schools is having the right infrastructure in place to underpin the technology. Do they have enough bandwidth? How will they manage multiple devices and platforms between home and school? Will pupils need to access their network resources at home? These are important considerations – but if a school can achieve this, then there are real learning benefits to be gained."

A question of timing

So in this ever-changing world of technology, how often should schools assess their hardware provision? "It is certainly important for schools to be aware of these constant trends, but not necessarily adopt all of them," advises Poyton. "A lot of technologies can be a distraction to the teaching and learning process rather than supporting it if not used properly. So choice and training are key"

"Hardware should be reviewed annually; possibly be upgraded or updated is always a sensible option, however with ever reducing prices on new hardware and renewed warranty, replacement is a consideration."

Improve or replace?

Once an assessment has been made, many schools will move to replacing their dated or poorly performing hardware, but is this necessarily the right decision? "It is very common for us to engage with school who believe that they need to make a large investment in hardware replacement in order to improve the performance of their existing systems which is causing the problems. With some time to reconfigure the servers and desktop build to optimise their use in a school environment, performance and reliability can be dramatically improved."



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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the adoption of mobile devices in schools, we can consider the findings from our 'Future of Tablets in Schools' survey of 310 secondary schools. The schools surveyed forecast that by the end of 2015, the percentage of tablets will be 22 per cent of all pupil-facing computers. But is this move the right choice for schools? "If schools are looking for quick flexible access to then mobile devices can be a fantastic facilitator managed service provider Dataspire. "The decision needs to be based on which type of mobile device is most appropriate, how they are expected to be used in the classroom and what learning applications they will need to run."

"Tablets are ideal for anywhere, anytime learning, surfing the web and digesting mini chunks of information," adds Winston Poyton, head of infrastructure at BESA member organisation RM. "However, students are using higher performance devices to create and write up more significant course work. In my view, ideally both types of devices should be available to students according to the type of activity they need to do."

But not all schools are rushing to invest in tablet technology. Our survey shows that 72 per cent are adopting a research-driven approach to tablet take-up, and want more evidence before supporting the adoption of tablets in the classroom. Schools reported that significant or very significant barriers to adoption of the tablet included funding constraints (82 per cent), concerns about the management and security of tablets (85 per cent), the value and portability risks (73 per cent) and the initial installation and payment for apps (71 per cent).

"There are many considerations to be made when investing in tablet technology," confirms Norton-Howells, "including device management, e-safety and the school's acceptable use policy, the implications of home access and of course whether there is an appropriate wireless network." Nik Tuson, managing director of Avantis, BESA member and provider of the LearnPad tablet offers a word of warning: "Many tablets are

Such cost saving can also be found at the point of procurement. "Tablets cost significantly less than a laptop computer," points out Tuson, "but by investing in a tablet with a slightly lower specification, schools can save even more. It may sound obvious, but we often see schools purchasing high-end devices, when a slightly lower specification would be ample for their needs and increase the total cost of ownership. When considering the higher specification tablet would last the school longer, but in reality this is not the case."

About the evidence

Finally, it is important that schools consider whether they can assess the likely impact of a piece of hardware on students' progress. Research over the years has shown that using technology effectively can certainly have a significant impact on teaching and learning. While the correct type of hardware is an important consideration, access to appropriate learning content is of course equally important.

Government investment over the past two decades has led to a significant adoption of technology in schools. However, schools must always understand their objectives regarding investment and how it will support learning. This is certainly a very exciting and shifting phase of hardware adoption in schools. And on the whole, we are delighted to see that, in the absence of DfE directives, schools are becoming increasingly savvy in their ICT procurement and also taking their time to make the right decisions for their pupils.